

What is SYPHILIS?

Syphilis (pronounced Siff-i-liss) is one of the more serious sexually-transmitted diseases (STDs). It's caused by a corkscrew-shaped bacteria called *Treponema pallidum*.

Today syphilis is still a commonly reported STD in the United States. People usually get syphilis by having vaginal, anal, or oral sex with someone who is infected with this disease. People can also get it by having direct contact with open sores caused by syphilis. Syphilis can also be passed on to unborn babies.

The chancre will heal by itself – even without treatment – within 1- to 5-weeks. This ends the first stage of syphilis.

HOW TO TELL If You Have Syphilis

Many people infected with syphilis do not have any symptoms for years, yet remain at risk for late complications if they are not treated. Although transmission most commonly occurs from persons with sores who are in the primary or secondary stage, many of these sores are not recognized. Thus, the disease is passed by persons who are unaware they are infected. Only the first two stages are discussed here.

Primary Syphilis

The first symptom to appear is a small, painless sore called a chancre (pronounced *shanker*). It forms at the site where the bacterium enters your body. The chancre is hard, and its surface looks like a crater. It's usually quite small, but it can sometimes be as big as a dime.

The chancre typically appears about 3-weeks after you have sex with someone who has syphilis. However, the chancre may appear as early as 10-days or as long as 3-months after you become infected.

Many people never even know that they have or had a chancre simply because it's small, painless and sometimes hidden by hair and/or skin folds. (This is especially true if the chancre is located inside the vagina, rectum or mouth.)

At this stage the bacteria can be easily passed to others who have any kind of direct contact with the chancre.

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Secondary Syphilis

If you don't notice the chancre (and thus, don't seek medical help), the bacteria will spread and multiply in your bloodstream. About 4-weeks after the primary syphilis chancre heals itself, other symptoms will begin to show up. They can include one, or more, of the following in both men and women:

- ▶ A skin rash, either all over the body or only in a few areas like the hands and feet. (Many people think they're having an allergic reaction to something, like soap or perfume.)
- ▶ White patches appear in the mouth or throat.
- ▶ Partial or full hair loss.
- ▶ General ill health.
- ▶ Even without treatment these symptoms will go away in 2- to 6-weeks. But don't let that stop you from getting medical help!

WHAT CAN HAPPEN If You Don't Get Treatment

If left untreated, the bacteria will continue to live and multiply in your blood and lymph glands. Over time the infection may also spread to your heart, bones and brain. It's not uncommon for serious illnesses to develop **years** after the appearance of the chancre. Many of these illnesses are life threatening.

It's very important for pregnant women who may have been exposed to syphilis to be tested for it early on in their pregnancy. The reason is simple: if a pregnant woman indeed has syphilis, her baby can either be born dead (stillborn) or have serious birth defects.

HOW TO FIND OUT If You Have Syphilis

The only way to know for certain that you have (or, don't have) syphilis is to go to a doctor or to a clinic and have a blood test done. The procedure is fast and simple. Test results usually only take a few days.

(Note: In many cases, the doctor will also encourage you to be tested for HIV, the virus that causes

AIDS. The reason for this is because the chancre creates a doorway for HIV to enter your body. If you've had sex with someone **after** the chancre appeared – and he or she has **HIV/AIDS** – the virus could have been spread to you.)

GETTING RID Of Syphilis

Syphilis is usually treated by a shot of penicillin. For people who are allergic to penicillin, other antibiotics are used instead. In all stages of syphilis, proper treatment will cure the disease, but in late syphilis, the damage already done to your body's organs can't be reversed.

Tips for Successful Treatment

- ▶ Follow the directions for taking your medicine (if you've been given pills).
- ▶ Take all of the medicine given to you, even if the symptoms disappear!
- ▶ Have your sex partners treated at the same time you are, otherwise you may re-infect each other.
- ▶ Have a follow-up exam in three months.
- ▶ Have no sex until you have finished taking all your medicines.

HOW TO REDUCE Your Chances Of Getting A STD

- ▶ Always use latex condoms (rubbers). Although condoms don't offer 100% protection, if used properly they may protect you from getting syphilis and other STDs. Both men and women should carry and use condoms.
- ▶ Spermicides like nonoxynol-9 do **NOT** prevent STD/HIV infections and should be used for pregnancy prevention **ONLY**.
- ▶ Talk to your partner and encourage him or her to use condoms every time you have sex. It's the best way/to avoid getting STDs.
- ▶ Keep a clear head. Alcohol and drugs affect the choices you make.
- ▶ Look for symptoms. If you or any of your sex partners have a discharge or sore, don't have sex until you're checked for a STD by a doctor or clinic.
- ▶ Make an agreement with your partner to have sex only with each other and no one else. Having sex with several people increases your chances of getting a STD.

AND FINALLY...

If you've been told that you have syphilis, anyone you've had sex with in the last 6 months to a year may also be infected with it. Remember, even if there are no symptoms, a person can still be infected. Getting early treatment is important!

If you feel uncomfortable about telling your sex partners about this, ask for help from the clinic where you were treated. They can provide information to the state health department and arrange for your partners to be told confidentially about their exposure to syphilis. Your name will **never** be given to those partners.

For more information, call:
STD HOTLINE
800-228-0254